

Leon Trotsky and the defense of historical truth

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20 March 2012

We are publishing here the lecture given by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, at the University of Leipzig on March 16. North, who has published extensively on the history of the socialist movement, is the author of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, a defense of historical truth and the legacy of Trotsky against the falsifications in the 2009 biography of Trotsky by the British author Robert Service and other similarly tendentious Trotsky biographies published in recent years.

North spoke at the conclusion of the Leipzig book fair, where Mehring Publishers released the German edition of *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*. (For a report on the meeting, see: “Leipzig meeting on Leon Trotsky and the defense of historical truth: 300 hear David North critique Robert Service’s biography of Trotsky”). The lecture was delivered in German. For access to the German version, [click here](#).

I would like, first of all, to thank the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit for inviting me to speak this evening in Leipzig, which is one of the historic centers of the German socialist workers’ movement. In the years before World War I, as the right-wing and opportunist tendencies within the Social Democratic Party (SPD) were exercising ever greater influence inside the SPD, the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* was the principal newspaper through which the revolutionary wing of the party, led by Rosa Luxemburg, defended the principles of genuine Marxism. Two decades later, in the critical years prior to the Nazi takeover in 1933, Leipzig was a major center of Trotskyist activity in Germany. The German Trotskyists were affiliated with the International Left Opposition that had been founded by Trotsky to fight against the disastrous policies of the Stalinist regime within the Soviet Union and internationally. In 1931, Trotsky, who had been expelled from the USSR and was living on the Turkish island of Prinkipo, declared that Germany was the “key” to the international situation. The growing power of the Nazi party, Trotsky warned, posed a mortal threat to the German, Soviet and international working class. He declared that a Nazi victory would be a catastrophe of unprecedented dimensions. It would be a staggering defeat of the most powerful socialist movement in Western Europe, would result in the establishment of a barbaric dictatorship, and would set into motion a chain of events leading to the outbreak of a second world war.

And yet, despite the colossal political stakes, the two mass parties of the German working class, the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party (KPD), were pursuing policies that were removing all obstacles to Hitler’s victory. The SPD, Trotsky explained, was clinging desperately to the rotting corpse of the Weimar regime, depending on the bourgeois state to bar the Nazi Party’s path to power. The KPD, following the instructions it received from Stalin, pursued the mindless policy of “social fascism.” That is, the KPD declared that there existed no significant differences between the Social Democracy, a mass party of the working class, and the NSDAP (Nazis), the mass party of the reactionary German petty-bourgeoisie. On this basis, the KPD leaders rejected Trotsky’s call

for a united front of the two mass working class parties against the Nazi danger.

Between 1931 and 1933, Trotsky sought to arouse the most politically conscious sections of the German working class and the socialist intelligentsia to the immense danger posed by fascism and the urgent necessity for a unified struggle of the proletariat to prevent a Nazi victory. Trotsky’s writings on German fascism rank among the greatest works of political literature in the twentieth century. No one else wrote with such prescience, precision and passion on the German events and their world historic implications.

This is how Trotsky defined fascism in his pamphlet *What Next?*, written in January 1932:

Fascism is not merely a system of reprisals, of brutal force, and of police terror. Fascism is a particular governmental system based on the uprooting of all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society. The task of fascism lies not only in destroying the Communist vanguard but in holding the entire class in a state of forced disunity. To this end the physical annihilation of the most revolutionary section of the workers does not suffice. It is also necessary to smash all independent and voluntary organizations, to demolish all the defensive bulwarks of the proletariat, and to uproot whatever has been achieved during three-quarters of a century by the Social Democracy and the trade unions. For, in the last analysis, the Communist Party also bases itself on these achievements.

In the same pamphlet, Trotsky brilliantly characterized the political bankruptcy of the SPD:

The present crisis that is convulsing capitalism obliged the Social Democracy to sacrifice the fruits achieved after protracted economic and political struggles and thus to reduce the German workers to the level of existence of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. There is no historical spectacle more tragic and at the same time more repulsive than the fetid disintegration of reformism amid the wreckage of all its conquests and hopes. The theatre is rabid in its straining for modernism. Let it stage more often Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*: this most modern of modern dramas. And let the director of the theatre also remember to reserve the front rows for the leaders of the Social Democracy.

Nothing written during that period on the subject of fascism is comparable to the work produced by Trotsky. The renowned journalist Kurt Tucholsky expressed his amazement that Trotsky, living in exile more than one thousand miles away, understood the political situation in Germany more clearly and profoundly than anyone else. Berthold Brecht, in discussion with Walter Benjamin and Emil Hesse-Burri, remarked that Trotsky could justly be described as the greatest European writer of his time.

But Trotsky’s writings and the activities of Trotskyists in Germany could not forestall the consequences of the betrayal of the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties. Hitler came to power in January 1933, and the tragedy foreseen by Trotsky came to pass.

More than 30 years later, during the political radicalization of the 1960s, Trotsky's writings were essential reading for workers and students who wanted to understand how it was possible for fascism to come to power in Germany. I belong to a generation, born in the aftermath of World War II, which found in the writings of Leon Trotsky an incomparable analysis of the political causes of the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century. Trotsky's writings made clear that the victory of fascism was not inevitable. Hitler's rise to power could have been prevented. Fascism was neither the irresistible outcome of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment," as claimed by Adorno and Horkheimer, nor the product of repressed sexuality, as argued by Wilhelm Reich. Fascism, the most barbaric form of bourgeois rule, came to power as a result of the failure and betrayals of the political leadership of the working class.

Trotsky's writings on Germany were only part of his extraordinary political legacy. The defense of Trotsky against lies and distortions, which continue unabated more than 70 years after his death, is necessary because of his central role in the history of the past century. All the critical events of the first four decades of the twentieth century were mirrored in his life's work. He was, next to Lenin, the most important figure in the Russian revolutionary movement, which culminated in the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. The perspective and program that inspired the October Revolution was based on Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which he developed in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1905. In the civil war that followed the October 1917 Revolution, Trotsky became the commander of the Red Army. Under his leadership, the Soviet Union was defended against counter-revolutionary forces which were backed by all the major imperialist powers.

Trotsky played a decisive role in the victory and defense of the socialist revolution in Russia. But his place in history is determined, above all, by his achievements as the foremost exponent and strategist of world socialist revolution. As far back as 1905 Trotsky had analyzed the Russian Revolution as part of a world revolutionary process. Earlier than anyone else, Trotsky had foreseen the possibility of the Russian working class coming to power in a socialist revolution. But he insisted that the fate of socialism in Russia depended, above all, on the victory of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries—above all, in Europe and the United States. The socialist revolution, Trotsky explained, may achieve its first victory in a national arena. But its survival is possible only to the extent that the revolution expands beyond the national boundaries within which it conquered power. The final victory of socialism is achieved with the overthrow of capitalism on a world scale.

In the final analysis, the central political issue that underlay the conflict that erupted inside the Russian Communist Party in the 1920s was the relationship between the building of socialism in the Soviet Union and the program of world socialist revolution which had formed the basis of the revolutionary strategy of the Bolshevik Party, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, in 1917. In October 1923, Trotsky's criticism of the growth of bureaucratism within the Bolshevik Party and Soviet state led to the formation of the Left Opposition. This was a critical month in not only Soviet, but also German history. The immense crisis that had erupted in Germany in the spring of 1923, with the French occupation of the Ruhr, led rapidly to the development of a revolutionary situation. Against the background of hyper-inflation and the disorientation of the bourgeois regime, an unprecedented opportunity arose for a successful revolutionary uprising by the German working class. But what was lacking was a determined revolutionary leadership. The German Communist Party's preparations for an uprising were haphazard and indecisive. The Soviet Communist Party, increasingly dominated by Trotsky's political opponents in the party leadership, provided the KPD with contradictory advice. In the last minute, the KPD called off its plans for a nationwide insurrection. In the confusion that followed, local insurrectionary outbreaks were suppressed and the bourgeois government recovered its

nerve. The German working class suffered a blow from which it never fully recovered, and which set into motion a chain of events that facilitated the explosive growth of the Nazi party.

The defeat in Germany strengthened the conservative bureaucratic tendencies within the Soviet Communist Party. As the civil war came to a conclusion, the state and party bureaucracy grew rapidly—consisting of tens of thousands of functionaries for whom a position in the apparatus meant personal security and privileges. These functionaries formed the social basis of Stalin's rapidly growing power as the general secretary of the Communist Party. The "secret" of Stalin's power lay in his attentiveness to the material interests of the growing caste of bureaucrats, who came to identify their own interests with the Soviet Union as a national state, rather than as the new center of world socialist revolution. The increasingly nationalist and conservative orientation of the bureaucracy found expression when Stalin unveiled in 1924 the program of "socialism in one country."

This program legitimized—theoretically, politically and in practice—the separation of the development of socialism within the USSR from the cause of international socialist revolution. It sanctioned the subordination of the interests of the international working class to the national interests of the ruling bureaucracy within the Soviet Union. This separation led rapidly to bitter attacks on Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Trotsky's insistence that the fate of socialism in the USSR depended on the victory of the working class beyond its borders became anathema to the Soviet bureaucrats, who were concerned, above all, with their own income and privileges. As Trotsky later wrote in his autobiography, the attacks on permanent revolution were motivated by the bureaucracy's self-conscious egotism. "Not everything for world revolution," thought the petty Soviet official as he denounced Trotsky and the program of permanent revolution. "Something for me too."

Nothing is more historically absurd and politically untenable than the claim that the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky was merely a subjective fight between two individuals over personal power. The struggle that erupted inside the Soviet Communist Party in the mid-1920s was between two irreconcilably opposed programs—the nationalist pseudo-socialism of the Soviet bureaucracy led by Stalin versus the socialist internationalism of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky. The outcome of this struggle was to determine the fate of the socialist revolution in the twentieth century and, ultimately, that of the Soviet Union itself.

The shift in the program of the Soviet Communist Party was not easily achieved. The ideas and ideals of socialist internationalism were deeply ingrained in the Soviet working class. Moreover, Trotsky occupied in the minds of the advanced Soviet workers and, indeed, among socialists throughout the world, a position of respect and prestige equaled only by Lenin. In contrast, when the factional struggle began in the early 1920s, Stalin was virtually unknown. For Stalin and his allies in the party and state bureaucracy to abandon the revolutionary internationalist program, it was necessary to destroy Trotsky's political influence. But this could not be achieved without rewriting history with the aim of denying Trotsky's preeminent role in the victory of the October Revolution. Herein lay the origins and political source of the campaign of historical falsification that began in 1923.

It is not possible, in the time available to us tonight, to trace in the necessary detail all the stages of this insidious process of falsification. The lies began with the distortion of old factional disputes in the pre-1917 revolutionary movement. It proceeded through the twisting of quotations and the selective citation and misinterpretation of documents. With astonishing speed an entirely new and grotesque persona was attached to Trotsky in the Soviet press. The slanders against Trotsky and his many supporters prepared the ground for expulsion and exile. Trotsky was deported from the USSR in January 1929. In 1932, he was formally deprived of citizenship. Within the Soviet Union, the Trotskyist

movement was subjected to increasingly violent repression. The bureaucracy's war against Trotskyism set the stage for a campaign of political genocide directed against all representatives of the international socialist program and culture within the Soviet working class and Marxist intelligentsia.

The three anti-Trotskyist trials held in Moscow between August 1936 and March 1938 marked the climax of the relentless process of historical falsification that had begun in 1923. In the course of these trials, the principal leaders of the Bolshevik Party were accused of plotting terror against Stalin, committing acts of sabotage within the USSR, and forming treasonous alliances with the fascist regimes in Germany and Japan. All the defendants—old revolutionaries who had devoted their entire adult lives to the cause of socialism—confessed to the most horrible crimes. But aside from their confessions, the prosecution did not produce a single piece of evidence in support of the accusations.

As has long been established, the confessions were extorted from the defendants through physical and psychological torture and threats against their families. Stalin secured the defendants' cooperation with cynical and empty promises to spare their lives and those of their loved ones if they played their assigned roles in the terrifying Moscow spectacle.

Many years later, in the early 1990s, I spoke to the daughter of Mikhail Boguslavsky, a defendant in the second trial, held in January 1937. Rebecca Boguslavskaya recalled visiting her father in the Lyubianka Prison in Moscow several weeks before the trial began. Mikhail Boguslavsky looked like a ghost—emaciated, with dark rings around his eyes. He was in pain, and moved uncomfortably in his chair. Rebecca realized that her father had been severely beaten, and that he found it difficult to place the weight of his body upon the seat. Boguslavsky looked at his daughter and cried out in agony: "You must renounce me. You must forget that I ever lived." Rebecca replied, "Papa, I will never renounce you."

At the trial itself, Boguslavsky looked somewhat better. He had been fed by his jailers, and Rebecca surmised that drugs had been administered to improve his appearance. But within hours of the trial's conclusion, Boguslavsky was shot. As for Rebecca, she was arrested soon afterwards and spent nearly two decades in a Siberian labor camp. She died in 1992 at the age of 79.

When the first of the Moscow Trials was staged in August 1936, Trotsky was living in Norway. In order to prevent Trotsky from answering the incredible charges being made against him in Moscow, the Norwegian government, controlled by the Social Democratic Party, placed Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, under house arrest. In December 1936, Trotsky was deported from Norway and placed on a freighter bound for Mexico.

In Mexico, Trotsky was finally able to reply publicly to the accusations of the Stalinist regime. He denounced the trials as a political frame-up and called for the organization of an "international counter-trial" to expose the "true criminals who hide behind the cloak of the accuser."

It must be recalled that in Europe and the United States, substantial segments of "left" public opinion—supporters of the "Popular Front" alliance of bourgeois liberals with the Stalinist parties—were willing to accept the accusations hurled against the defendants in Moscow without objection. They bitterly opposed Trotsky's call for the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into the Moscow trials, fearing that an exposure of the lies of the Kremlin would undermine the liberal-Stalinist populist front against fascism—as if the struggle against fascism could be served through the legalized murder of revolutionaries.

Despite the opposition of liberals and Stalinists, a Commission of Inquiry into the trials was established in the spring of 1937 under the chairmanship of the greatest living American philosopher, John Dewey. The Commission traveled to Mexico in April, where for more than one week it questioned Trotsky on all matters related to the accusations

against him. Trotsky's testimony consisted of a defense of his activities and his ideas over a period that spanned 40 years, beginning with his entry into revolutionary politics as a 17-year-old youth in 1897.

The climax of the Commission's work in Mexico was, undoubtedly, Trotsky's closing speech. He spoke for 4 ½ hours in English. I am not merely speaking as a Trotskyist partisan when I state that this oration ranks among the very greatest in world history. In one of the many remarkable passages to be found in the text, Trotsky explained the origins and significance of the lies upon which the Moscow Trials were based. The lies of the Soviet regime were not merely the product of Stalin's pathological personality. Rather, they were rooted in the material interests of the bureaucracy of which Stalin was the chief representative:

One can understand the acts of Stalin only by starting from the conditions of existence of the new privileged stratum, greedy for power, greedy for material comforts, apprehensive for its positions, fearing the masses, and mortally hating all opposition.

The position of a privileged bureaucracy in a society which that bureaucracy itself calls Socialist is not only contradictory, but also false. The more precipitate the jump from the October overturn—which laid bare all social falsehood—to the present situation, in which a caste of upstarts is forced to cover up its social ulcers, the cruder the Thermidorean lies. It is, consequently, a question not simply of the individual depravity of this or that person, but of the corruption lodged in the position of a whole social group for whom lying has become a vital political necessity.

Herein lay the key to understanding not only the lies of the Moscow Trials, but, more generally, the significance of all historical falsifications. There is a well-known saying: "If geometric axioms impinged on material interests, an attempt would be made to refute them." Similarly, to the extent that the ruling class sees the historic record as a threat to the legitimacy of its dominant position in society, it must resort to distortions and outright falsifications. The Stalinist bureaucracy resorted to the most brazen and monstrous lies to cover up its betrayal of the principles of the October Revolution, and to conceal the ever-more glaring contradiction between the real goals of socialism and the bureaucracy's defense of its own material interests as a privileged caste.

An understanding of the objective significance and social function of historical falsifications allows us to answer a highly important question: Why is it that we are still compelled to deal with lies about the historical role of Leon Trotsky? Seventy-five years have passed since the Dewey Commission, which concluded its work with an unequivocal declaration that Trotsky was innocent of all the charges leveled against him, and that the Moscow Trials were a frame-up. Fifty-six years have passed since Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, in his famous "secret speech" of February 1956 before the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, denounced Stalin as a criminal and all but acknowledged that the Moscow Trials were based on lies. Twenty years have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an event that vindicated Trotsky's life-and-death struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. He justified his struggle against Stalinism as politically necessary if the Soviet Union was to be saved from destruction by the bureaucratic regime.

It would seem to be obvious that Trotsky is a major historical figure. Even after he lost power, he continued to exercise immense influence through his writings. Not even his assassination in August 1940 could free the bureaucracy of the specter of international Trotskyism. The publication of Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography led to a resurgence of interest in Trotsky throughout the world. A measure of the Soviet bureaucracy's never-ending fear of Trotsky was the fact that of all the Bolshevik revolutionaries murdered by the Stalinist regime, Trotsky was the only figure who was never officially rehabilitated.

It is to be expected that Trotsky must remain, given the nature of his political aims, an intensely controversial figure. But can there be any question that his activities and his ideas deserve the most intellectually

conscientious study? But if this has not happened—if, instead, we have witnessed over the past decade a renewal and intensification of the campaign of lies—it is necessary to uncover and explain the political and social necessity that motivate the unrelenting falsification of virtually every aspect of his life.

I believe that the campaign against Trotsky derives its momentum from two inter-related factors of a historical and political character. First, let us deal with the historical factor. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the USSR gave rise to an outburst of bourgeois triumphalism. Prior to 1989, predictions that the Stalinist regimes were heading toward a shipwreck could be found only in Trotskyist publications. Not a single prominent bourgeois historian or journalist had anticipated the dissolution of the East European and Soviet regimes. However, once the regimes no longer existed, bourgeois politicians, academics and journalists proclaimed that their collapse had been inevitable. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 “proved” that the October Revolution of 1917 had been doomed from the start. From the very beginning, the socialist revolution of 1917 could lead only in one direction: to the restoration of capitalism. That this process unfolded over a period spanning nearly three-quarters of a century did not call into question the inevitability of the outcome. No other course of development was possible. The Stalinist regime was not the betrayal of the October Revolution. It was the unavoidable historical blind alley created by the events of 1917, and from which the only exit was the restoration of capitalism.

This mechanical interpretation of Soviet history demanded the denial of the very possibility of a different, non-totalitarian and socialist evolution of the USSR. No alternative path of development was to be taken seriously. This position determined the treatment of Trotsky. The struggle he waged against Stalinism was to be minimized, if not entirely ignored. On no account was he to be presented as a viable alternative to Stalin.

But by the turn of the new century, the historical issues that demanded the denial of Trotsky’s significance as an alternative to Stalinism were compounded by new political anxieties. The triumphalism evoked by the dissolution of the USSR had already begun to dissipate as the twentieth century drew to a close. The economic shocks that began with the Asian crisis in 1998 made all too clear that the end of the USSR had not cured capitalism of its own deep-rooted maladies. The conditions of life of broad sections of the working class, even before the collapse of 2008, steadily worsened in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Against the backdrop of deteriorating economic conditions, the increasingly unrestrained militarism of the imperialist ruling elites—institutionalized in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 as the “war against terror”—encountered steadily mounting popular opposition. With social tensions becoming ever more palpable, bourgeois strategists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski began to voice alarm about the potentially revolutionary implications of a rapidly growing global population of well-educated but disaffected youth, unable to find decent jobs and economic security.

In these uncertain conditions, the bourgeoisie recalled the political atmosphere of the 1960s, when the writings of Trotsky—which had been suppressed for decades—suddenly became essential reading material for radicalized youth. In the far more uncertain economic environment of the new century, as workers and youth began to look for alternatives to capitalism, did there not exist the danger that Trotsky might again provide theoretical and political direction and inspiration for a new generation entering into revolutionary struggle? After all, the academic guardians of bourgeois interests asked, how many of Trotsky’s damned books were in print? Works such as *The History of the Russian Revolution*, *The Revolution Betrayed*, and, worst of all, Trotsky’s enthralling autobiography, *My Life*. What could be done to counter the revolutionary narrative of Trotsky’s literary masterpiece?

The new age of pre-emptive war produced a new literary genre: the pre-emptive biography! In the space of little more than five years, no less than three such pre-emptive biographies of Trotsky were published. The first biography, by Professor Ian Thatcher, was published in 2003. The second biography, by Professor Geoffrey Swain, was published in 2006. I wrote a lengthy reply to these two books that was published in 2007. I exposed in detail the crude falsifications, based largely on the old lies concocted by the Stalinists, retailed by the two British historians. Whatever hope that I entertained of having silenced the anti-Trotsky enterprise of the British academic establishment was soon disappointed. Robert Service’s biography appeared in 2009.

Thus, I found myself obligated to write a detailed refutation of yet another volume aimed at discrediting Trotsky. Together with my earlier analysis of the biographies of Thatcher and Swain, and two other shorter essays in which I sought to explain the contemporary relevance of Trotsky’s work, the critique of Service was published in a volume entitled *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*. There is no need for me to review in detail my refutation of the works of Thatcher, Swain and Service. I believe that the quality and integrity of my effort have been substantiated by a lengthy review written by historian Bertrand Patenaude that was published last June in the *American Historical Review*. Professor Patenaude unambiguously endorsed my description of Service’s biography as a piece of “hack work.” Moreover, I welcome the open letter to the Suhrkamp publishing house, written by 14 distinguished European historians, endorsing my exposure of Service’s book and opposing the publication of a German-language edition. That 14 outstanding historians should feel compelled to protest the publication of Service’s book testifies decisively to the utterly appalling character of Service’s work.

One might have thought that the open letter from 14 distinguished historians would have so discredited Robert Service that no serious historian would have intervened in his behalf. After all, the central charge against Service’s biography was that it violated the most basic standards of scholarship. There were numerous factual errors. Service advanced arguments that lacked any documentary foundation. He attributed to Trotsky opinions and positions that he did not hold, including those that were the exact opposite of what Trotsky had actually written. Moreover, the historians concurred with my objections to Service’s treatment of Trotsky’s Jewish ancestry in a manner that tended to legitimize the anti-Semitic stereotypes and slanders that were frequently used against him.

Moreover, Suhrkamp, while not replying to the historians, has delayed publication of Service’s book while retaining an “outside expert” to examine the biography and correct the most glaring factual errors. In this way, Suhrkamp is attempting to salvage what it can of a publishing disaster with the literary equivalent of plastic surgery. But the intractable nature of the problem it confronts is indicated in the promotional introduction for Service’s book that is posted on the Suhrkamp web site. Suhrkamp refers to “the man born in 1879 in the southern Ukraine under the name of Lev Davidovitch Bronstein.” But this statement contradicts Service’s claim that Trotsky’s real first name was Leiba, and that he was known by this Yiddish name throughout his youth. For the first 40 pages of the English-language edition of his biography, Service refers to the young Trotsky only as “Leiba.” Service then claims that it was only after he turned eighteen that the young Bronstein decided to assume the name Lëva, in order to have a Russian-sounding name like his comrades in the revolutionary movement. In order to stress the significance of this change in Trotsky’s first name, Service writes: “Semantically it had nothing to do with the Yiddish name Leiba...”

As I have already explained at length, this entire story is an invention of Service. Trotsky’s first name was Lev, and he was known by this name (or a diminutive such as Lyova) from his earliest childhood. However, the false attribution of the name Leiba to the young Trotsky plays a central role in Service’s biography. First, it serves to magnify Trotsky’s Jewish

identity in a manner frequently used by his anti-Semitic opponents. Second, Service claims that Trotsky's effort to conceal his real first name was not only an example of his recurring efforts to play down his Jewish origins, but also one of the significant inaccuracies that Service claims to have uncovered in Trotsky's autobiography.

However, it appears that Service's error in attributing the name Leiba to the young Trotsky may have been corrected by the expert hired by Suhrkamp. Thus, we are left with an interesting literary paradox. The subject of Service's biography will have been born with one name in the English edition and a quite different one in the German edition!

Suhrkamp's web site states that the Service biography will be released in July. But the open letter of the 14 historians and the long delay in the publication of the book have provoked alarm in right-wing circles and among a layer of anti-Marxist historians. The extreme right-wing newspaper *Junge Freiheit* has come to Service's defense, praising his work for repudiating any sort of sympathetic portrayal of Trotsky. The newspaper praises Service's remark at a book launch in London, "If the icepick didn't quite do its job killing him off, I hope I've managed it," as "an attractive comment."

One can hardly be surprised by the defense of Service in the pages of *Junge Freiheit*. Of greater interest are two articles in support of Service that have appeared in the pages of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Their author is Professor Dr. Ulrich M. Schmid, who teaches at the University of St. Gallen and who has written widely on matters relating to history, philosophy, literature and culture. His curriculum vitae, posted on the university web site, list more than 600 articles—a quite astonishing number. His essays appear frequently in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

The first article appeared in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on December 28, 2011. Its title, somewhat predictably, was "No Alternative to Stalin." It begins by deploring that Trotsky was viewed by the '68 Generation as a viable alternative to Stalin:

If after Lenin's death it had not been Stalin but rather Trotsky who took over the leadership of the Soviet Union—so goes the argument—then the experiment in a socialist form of society would not have relapsed into an inhumane dictatorship.

Many western socialists allowed themselves to be blinded by Trotsky's intellectual brilliance, and concluded too quickly from his hostility to Stalin that Trotsky was motivated by the ideal of socialism with a human face.

Following Service's approach, Schmid attempts to refute this favorable view of Trotsky by portraying him as a sort of monster, capable of the worst abominations. He writes:

Right from the beginning of his career as commissar of war Trotsky demonstrated his utter monstrousness. He obtained the obedience of tsarist officers by taking their families as hostages.

When one reads such furious denunciations of Trotsky's actions as a military commander, one might almost believe that prior to the appearance of Trotsky on the stage of history, civil wars were non-violent and bloodless affairs, in which the opposing sides treated one another with mutual affection and unblemished kindness. And yet, as we all know, history tells a very different story. But Schmid prefers to avoid placing Trotsky's actions in a broader historical context that might explain, and even justify, his actions.

Between 1918 and 1921, as Trotsky defended the Soviet regime against the forces of counter-revolution, he knew very well the likely consequences of a Bolshevik defeat. He belonged to a generation of revolutionaries for whom the events that followed the suppression of the Paris Commune in May 1871 were still part of living memory. In the week that followed the defeat of the Commune, the victorious National Guard commanded by the bourgeois regime slaughtered somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 workers. Adolph Thiers, president of the bourgeois regime, said of the communards: "The ground is strewn with

their corpses. May this terrible sight serve as a lesson."

But Trotsky did not need the example of the Paris Commune to remind him what awaited the Bolshevik regime and the Soviet working class if the counter-revolution was victorious. The Bolsheviks and masses of workers and peasants remembered very well the bloodbath that had followed the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. The tsarist regime sent its army on punitive expeditions into towns and villages where the population had evinced support for the revolution. Tens of thousands of people were murdered in cold blood by the tsarist troops as the towns and villages in which they lived were destroyed.

Schmid, like Service, fails to note one other not entirely insignificant fact: the October Revolution occurred against the backdrop of World War I, which had begun in the summer of 1914. By the time the Bolsheviks came to power, approximately 1.7 million Russian soldiers had already been lost in the senseless bloodbath. Millions more died on the various fronts of World War I, a conflict which, in the words of one historian, "produced the most extensive cultural devastation and mass killing in Europe since the Thirty Years War." The violence of the Russian Revolution was in no small measure determined by the horrifying social and economic conditions created by Russia's participation in the World War. In his book *The Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, historian Alan Kramer (the author of the sentence cited above) wrote:

...To say that the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the nature of the Soviet Union were profoundly affected by Russia's experience in war would be an understatement: it was a seven-year catastrophe of war, political upheaval, and civil war, which shaped the entire political culture of the Bolshevik regime for the following decades.

Determined to discredit Trotsky on moral grounds, Schmid offers further examples of Trotsky's alleged "monstrousness." He writes:

When his Red Army unit on the Kazan front in 1918 retreated before the enemy, Trotsky summarily ordered the commander and 40 soldiers to be shot and had their corpses thrown into the Volga.

It is true that Trotsky, at a critical moment when the fate of the newly organized Red Army hung in the balance, ordered the execution of soldiers who had deserted under fire. Trotsky took this extreme measure in order to maintain discipline, and recounted the incident in his autobiography. In the context of war, Trotsky's actions were justified. As Schmid must certainly know, the death penalty was employed against deserters in the German, French and British armies during World War I. Perhaps because he doubts the effectiveness of his condemnation of Trotsky's use of the death penalty, Schmid adds a strange and disturbing detail: that Trotsky ordered the corpses of the executed deserters to be thrown into the Volga.

This statement evokes in the mind of the reader a frightening image. Trotsky not only shot deserters, but denied them a proper burial. He dumped their corpses into a river! I have never come across this gruesome detail before. What is the documentary evidence upon which Schmid bases this allegation? Professor Schmid should let us know where he discovered this alleged act of inhumanity.

Schmid cites other well-known indictments of Trotsky's alleged cruelty, such as the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising in 1921. Once again, these events are presented without reference to, let alone serious analysis of, the political and historical context within which they occurred. This form of presentation makes no contribution whatever to an understanding of the events, or Trotsky's role in them. Their sole purpose is the advancement of Schmid's own politically motivated anti-communist agenda. In the final paragraph of his first article, Schmid again complains that

Although there can no longer exist any doubts about Trotsky's dictatorial inclinations, there are still "Communist Nostalgists" who wish to regard him as having been martyred by a conspiracy orchestrated by

Stalin and world capitalism. The absurd assumption of such an alliance itself makes clear how far removed these authors are from common sense.

This supposedly absurd assumption is substantiated by the fact that Trotsky and his supporters were persecuted simultaneously by Stalinist, fascist and bourgeois democratic governments. Following his expulsion from the USSR, Trotsky was denied asylum by both the British and German governments. He was later allowed to enter France only after accepting severe restraints on not only his political activity, but also his physical movement within the country. In 1936, as I have already mentioned, the Norwegian government placed Trotsky in confinement in order to prevent him from publicly exposing the frame-up trial in Moscow. The widespread support for the Moscow Trials among bourgeois liberals in Europe and the United States flowed from their political alliance with the Stalinist parties, which formed the basis of the “Popular Front” movement of the 1930s. By mocking those who write of a Stalinist-imperialist alliance against Trotskyism, Schmid betrays his own ignorance of the political dynamics of the 1930s.

In a second article by Schmid, published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on February 21, 2012, he acknowledges that my critique of Service’s book has been substantiated by Professor Bertrand Patenaude of Stanford University. He also takes notice of the letter from the fourteen historians, mentioning by name Helmut Dahmer, Hermann Weber, Bernhard Bayerlein, Heiko Haumann, Mario Kessler, Oskar Negt, Oliver Rathkolb and Peter Steinbach. Schmid certainly knows that all these historians are immensely respected scholars. Schmid could not help but be troubled to find the name of Professor Heiko Haumann on the list of signatories protesting against the publication of Service’s biography. Professor Haumann assisted Schmid in the preparation of his *habilitationsschrift* [post-doctoral dissertation] in 1998-99, a service for which Schmid publicly expressed his gratitude. But now Schmid finds himself in the embarrassing position of challenging the judgment of one of his own mentors.

Schmid adopts a curious strategy in his defense of Service’s book. He admits that there are mistakes, but he dismisses these errors as inconsequential. Schmid refers to them disingenuously as “little mistakes,” which include “false dates of death... the inexact description of historical events... unreliable footnotes... the mixing up of family relationships... the truncation of citations... the selective preference for memoirs that show Trotsky in an unfavorable light...”

One can only read this list of Service’s departure from basic standards of scholarship with amazement. Any one of these faults would be considered out of place in a book written by a professional historian. To find all these errors in a historical work published in the United States under the imprimatur of Harvard University Press is nothing short of a major intellectual scandal. An academic who produces such a work forfeits all right to be taken seriously as a scholar. A publishing house that produces such a work is violating its professional and ethical responsibility to uphold the integrity of intellectual discourse.

Professor Schmid cannot be unaware of the seriousness of Service’s failure to observe academic norms. He writes prolifically and, as far as I can tell from a brief review of a portion of his published academic work, seeks to observe professional standards. And yet he seems to believe that Service should be allowed to violate the rules of scholarly work with impunity. Schmid would have readers believe that the factual errors that appear in Service’s biography—which are so numerous that Suhrkamp has been obligated to hire an independent expert to review the entire text—is a problem of no great significance. Of course, an occasional factual error may be found in the work of even the most diligent historian. But the discovery of numerous factual errors in a single work is another matter entirely. The presence of such errors is evidence that the author is not in command of his subject matter, and his interpretation of events loses all credibility.

But despite the exposure of all the errors in Service’s work, Schmid insists that its publication must go forward. He writes:

The German translation is to be published in a corrected version at the beginning of July 2012—but there will not be far-reaching changes in the structure of the text. The decision of the publishing house is correct: neither North nor Patenaude have been able to advance arguments that undermine Service’s fundamental critique of Trotsky’s revolutionary fanaticism and his willingness to use violence.

As this passage makes all too clear, the sole basis of his defense of Service is Schmid’s ideological and political commitments. Despite the errors, falsifications and violations of scholarly standards, Service’s book satisfies the only criterion that is of importance to Schmid: it is against Trotsky and against socialist revolution. Nothing else matters.

More than 70 years after Trotsky’s assassination, his legacy remains the subject of the fiercest controversy. He has been denied the right to pass into the realm of dispassionate historical scholarship. Trotsky remains an intensely contemporary figure. He lives in history, not only as the leader of the greatest revolution of the 20th century, but as a political and intellectual inspiration of the revolutions of the future.

More than 20 years after the dissolution of the USSR, capitalism is mired in crisis. The End of History promised by Francis Fukuyama has not been realized. What we are witnessing is the return of history—that of economic crisis, the relentless assault on democratic rights, and the eruption of imperialist wars. In this situation, the working class must study history in order to understand the present-day reality. The defense of Trotsky’s legacy against historical falsification is an essential component of the political education of the working class and its preparation for the political demands of a new epoch of revolutionary struggle.



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